

Census data: Population loss in lower-income cities offsets growth in southern Lake County

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When the U.S. Census Bureau released county-level population statistics earlier this year, the data showed that the number of people living in Lake County remained relatively flat between 2015 and 2016.

More granular data made public Thursday provides a closer look, showing the cities and villages within the county that are attracting and losing residents. The numbers give additional insight into the recent trend of population loss in Illinois and the Chicago area, which shed more people than any other metropolitan area in the country from 2015 to 2016.

There were 703,047 people living in Lake County as of July 1, 2016, down from 703,413 a year earlier, according to the estimates released earlier this year. The loss of 366 residents reflected a decrease of less than one-tenth of 1 percent.

The city-level data published Thursday showed that the areas within Lake County that suffered population loss were generally the lower-income communities along the northeastern Lake Michigan waterfront and cities and villages in the Chain O'Lakes area. Meanwhile, the more affluent communities in the southern part of the county tended to experience population growth.

Elizabeth Schuh, principal policy analyst at the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning, said that although it didn't lose as many people as populous Cook County last year, Lake County is still experiencing trends that mirror the stagnant or even negative growth in the region.

"Since 2010, about half of the municipalities in Lake County have lost population in at least four of the last six years, which is pretty substantive," Schuh said.

Waukegan, the county seat and most populous city in Lake County, lost 168 people between 2015 and 2016 and has shed nearly 1,000 residents since 2010, the data shows. Similarly, North Chicago lost 69 people last year and more than 2,600 since 2010. Round Lake Beach, Zion, Gurnee and Antioch are also decreasing in population.

"It might just still be very slow growth, or not any growth, but it is following a regional trend that we think is a concern for our economic success and our quality of life," Schuh said.

On the other end of the spectrum, Volo, Hawthorn Woods and Vernon Hills were among the Lake County communities that gained the most population last year, with Volo increasing by 222 residents, Hawthorn Woods by 219 and Vernon Hills by 56. All three of those communities have sustained that growth since 2010 — Volo has grown by 1,361 residents, Vernon Hills by 1,270 and Hawthorn Woods by 405.

"Volo actually had some pretty big subdivisions that it had platted before the recession, and I think some of them now have kicked back in," said Tom Chefalo, principal planner at the Lake County Planning, Building and Development Department. "So a lot of those lots that had been sitting empty are being filled by homes now."

Other Lake County communities that have increased in population since 2010 are Deerfield (731 new residents), Mundelein (426) and Lake Zurich (265) — all of which are in the southern half of the county.

"It's actually not surprising," Chefalo said of the data released Thursday. "Because the real estate market's recovered more quickly in the south, and there's actually been more building going on in the southern portion of the

county."

The numbers serve as another measure of the different levels of opportunity and quality of life across the county. Not only are lower-income communities tending to lose population, they are also suffering worse health outcomes, with North Chicago residents, for example, dying at an average age of 64, compared with 78 or 79 in affluent Lake Forest, five miles down Sheridan Road. Lake Forest's population has been almost flat, gaining just six residents last year and losing only nine since 2010.

Kevin Considine, chief executive and president at the economic development nonprofit Lake County Partners, said the areas that are gaining in population are "the communities that seem like they're offering the amenities that the young professionals are looking for."

As for cities like Waukegan and North Chicago, "that's where we're focusing a lot of our workforce development efforts, training folks for a lot of the middle-skill manufacturing jobs," Considine added.

It's not just about "providing talent for the companies," Considine said, "but also providing the opportunities for the people."

Nationally, the census data shows that 10 of the 15 fastest-growing large cities last year were in the southern United States, with four of the top five in Texas.

"Overall, cities in the South continue to grow at a faster rate than any other U.S. region," Amel Toukabri, a demographer in the Census Bureau's population division, said in a news release. "Since the [2010 census](#), the population in large Southern cities grew by an average of 9.4 percent. In comparison, cities in the West grew 7.3 percent, while cities in the Northeast and Midwest had much lower growth rates at 1.8 percent and 3.0 percent respectively."

Chicago remained the third-largest city in the nation, behind New York and Los Angeles. Houston and Phoenix rounded out the top five.

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